

Luke 2:1-21 (Part 7) “When God Works Backwards” July 10, 2011

Main Idea: When God seems to work backwards, I can still have confidence in His sovereignty.

When God seems to work backwards, I can have confidence in Him because:

- God can work through a corrupt system – 2:1-3

1) Taxation decree for entire Roman Empire – 2:1

*“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.”*  
Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐξῆλθεν δόγμα παρὰ Καίσαρος Αύγούστου ἀπογράφεσθαι πᾶσαν τὴν οἰκουμένην.

#### *Sitz em leben*

“The efforts of the Emperor might be viewed as unwittingly serving the divine plan in having the Messiah born in Bethlehem (cf. Mic 5:2).<sup>1</sup>

\*Sovereignty & Compatibilism – God is sovereign over the affairs of mankind

\*Death of Ahab I Kings 22:34-35 “But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel between the scale armor and the breastplate. Therefore he said to the driver of his chariot, “Turn around and carry me out of the battle, for I am wounded.”<sup>35</sup> And the battle continued that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot facing the Syrians, until at evening he died. And the blood of the wound flowed into the bottom of the chariot.”

“an archer drew his bow at random...” At random? At least, so it seems...

\*Rapid spread of Alexander the Great

\*Onslaught of the mechanical shock troops, the Legions of the Roman Empire, that had conquered all of France, Spain, Germany, Belgium up to the English Channel, all of North Africa unto the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, you could not land on any shore within the Mediterranean that was not Roman Territory. All of Greece, all of Galatia, all of Egypt, and all of Palestine was under the boot of Rome.

Point = What did the Greeks do? They spread the Greek language, the trade “one world” language that most everyone in the known world was acquainted with. Then the Romans, after they had massacred the young men, built roads. And boy did they build roads! Some are still in use today. So then you have Luke 2 that records God bringing Jesus into the known world when it had a 1) unified language 2) road system 3) uniform system of laws (protection from robbers). The Romans were unusually brutal in the treatment of robbers and pirates).

Q# Who was Caesar Augustus? His birth name was Gaius Octavian and was, “the grandnephew and later adopted son and designated heir of Julius Caesar, Augustus was recognized as sole leader of the Roman world in 27 B.C.E.”<sup>2</sup>

Julius Caesar was the first Roman Emperor and the destroyer of the Roman Republic.

Point = Centralization of power always turns free peoples into pawns for the often twisted objectives of the centralized government.

\*Founding Fathers greatly admired and respected the Roman Republic for its early stance on the rule of law and personal liberty (this included the disposing of the King of Rome and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 121-122.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 125.

institution of a republican form of government). George Washington was even referred to as the “Cincinnatus of the West.”<sup>3</sup>

Point = Yet at this time the Roman Republic had been stabbed in the back by the grand uncle of Augustus Caesar. From the tomb of the Roman Republic a grotesque monster called the Roman Empire, run by an imperial cult that revolved around worship of the Emperor. Here is what was said of Augustus Caesar, “Divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world . . .”<sup>4</sup>

a. During Quirinius’ governorship of Syria – 2:2

“This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.”  
αὕτη ἀπογραφὴ πρώτη ἐγένετο ἡγεμονεύοντος τῆς Συρίας Κυρηνίου.

Q# I thought Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great and didn’t Herod die in 4 B.C.? Wasn’t Quirinius governor of Syria from 6-7 A.D. \*Dates for governorship<sup>5</sup> – “a very perplexing verse, inasmuch as Cyrenius, or Quirinus, appears not to have been governor of Syria for about ten years after the birth of Christ, and the “taxing” under his administration was what led to the insurrection mentioned in Ac 5:37. That there was a taxing, however, of the whole Roman Empire under Augustus, is now admitted by all; and candid critics, even of skeptical tendency, are ready to allow that there is not likely to be any real inaccuracy in the statement of our Evangelist. Many superior scholars would render the words thus, “This registration was *previous* to Cyrenius being governor of Syria”—as the word “first” is rendered in Jn 1:15; 15:18. In this case, of course, the difficulty vanishes. But it is perhaps better to suppose, with others, that the registration may have been ordered with a view to the taxation, about the time of our Lord’s birth, though the taxing itself—an obnoxious measure in Palestine—was not carried out till the time of Quirinus.”<sup>6</sup>

“When Quirinius (Κυρηνίου [Kurēniou]). Genitive absolute. Here again Luke has been attacked on the ground that Quirinius was only governor of Syria once and that was A.D. 6 as shown by Josephus (*Ant. XVIII. I. I.*). But Ramsay has proven by inscriptions that Quirinius was twice in Syria and that Luke is correct here also. See summary of the facts in my *Luke the Historian in the Light of Research*, pp. 118–29.”<sup>7</sup>

“P. Sulpicius Quirinius was made governor of Syria in A.D. 6, and took a census of Judea at that time. There is good evidence that he was twice governor of Syria, and that his first governorship

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dl.ket.org/latin1/historia/people/cincinnatus01.htm>

<sup>4</sup> David Braund, *Augustus to Nero: A Sourcebook for Roman History*, 66. Cited in, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 125-126.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc09/htm/iv.vi.xii.htm>

<sup>6</sup> R. Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, & D. Brown, *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Lk 2:2) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

<sup>7</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Lk 2:2) (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

was from 4 B.C. to A.D. 1. The preceding census may have been closing when he first took office.”<sup>8</sup>

“Some scholars dispute whether Quirinius was governor of Syria at this time. Quirinius was certainly governor of Syria during the much-remembered later census of A.D. 6, when Sepphoris and some Galilean patriots revolted against the tax census of that year. This passage seems to refer to an earlier census while Herod the Great was still king (before 4 B.C.); thus Luke’s “first census under Quirinius.”<sup>9</sup>

**“Note. 2** The *census* of Augustus creates historical problems. Despite assertions to the contrary, it does seem possible that a listing of the people for taxation, such as was carried out in areas directly ruled by Rome, could have taken place in the kingdom of a subject king like Herod. The census was based on where one resided or held property. The major problem is that *Quirinius* did not become governor of Syria until AD 6, at which time he certainly imposed a tax which caused a sharp rebellion (Acts 5:37). Jesus, however, was born before the death of Herod in 4 BC.

Suggested solutions to the problem are: a. ‘Quirinius is a textual error in the MSS for ‘Saturninus’ (who was governor of Syria 9–6 BC). b. Quirinius held an earlier appointment in the area, probably not the governorship of Syria but some kind of ‘roving commission’ in the eastern empire. c. Associated with this hypothesis is the view that, since a census and the imposition of taxes would take a lengthy period, Luke may be referring to a process begun under Herod and completed under Quirinius. d. A possible alternative translation is that the census ‘took place *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria’. No firm decision between these possibilities is possible at present.”<sup>10</sup>

## 2) Entire Roman Empire obeys – 2:3

“And all went to be registered, each to his own town.”

καὶ ἐπορεύοντο πάντες ἀπογράφεσθαι, ἔκαστος εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ πόλιν.

\*Government control & Martial Arts – control the head and the body will follow. Finances are the head.

\*Prophecy fulfilled because of the dictates of a pagan Emperor of a pagan Empire

\*Mary was in Bethlehem and about to give birth! She was in the wrong place! Yet the decree of Augustus set in motion the events that would lead her to the right place.

Q# Did God make Augustus make the decree?

= God does not commit evil. Because God knows everyone and everything, He places people at the specific places and uses them, whether they serve Him or reject Him, and their choices to work out His perfect will.

Micah 5:2

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,*

*who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,*

---

<sup>8</sup> C. F. Pfeiffer, & E.F. Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Lk 2:1) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

<sup>9</sup> C.S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Lk 2:2) (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

<sup>10</sup> D.A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed.) (Lk 2:1–20) (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

*from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose coming forth is from of old,  
from ancient days.*

Joseph was from Bethlehem. The prophecy said the Messiah must be born in Bethlehem. Caesar Augustus writes the executive order for everyone to return to their hometown to register and pay taxes. There was no E-file on the taxes. Incredibly, a pagan, oppressive decree is the tool God uses to shuttle Mary and Joseph to the precise hick town where the Son of God, the Savior of the world, was to enter into the world.

Point = If God can do this; you can have confidence that He can work through a corrupt system. If He can work through a macro-system like executive orders within the Roman Empire then why can He not work through and speak through things that we call “Pains in the Neck,” (or pains in other places).

\*Josh's blog “The Need for Thorns”

“Paul wrote about having thorns. No he wasn’t speaking about the “shrubbery” of the day but more specifically the pain and trials that God not only allows in life, but uses to process the work of sanctification. It is not a popular topic, you will not find a whole section in the book store on pain, trials, thorns or struggle. If you do find these books, people usually avoid it because we as humans tend to run after the fleeting feeling of pleasure to try and avoid the pain in our lives. I am definitely guilty. Why is there a need for pain in life? More specifically, why is the Christian life so difficult at times? We have all heard the gospel. A loving God who comes to die for a sinful, angry, bitter, and selfish creation called humans. We are faced with a choice to find our worth through the cross or run after the pleasures of the world which eventually lead to destruction. Paul explains how to respond to the thorns in life:

*Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.<sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.<sup>9</sup> But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.<sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.*

When faced with thorns, we have three choices:

1. **Run away from pain.** This is the most widely chosen response to pain. I know I have tried before in life to cover pain by becoming busy to avoid it. God wants us to listen especially when we are hurting. It is his way to awaken us from becoming focused upon earthly things and reminds us of eternal things!
2. **Deny the pain.** Many times the response is to act as if you are not hurting. I think as Christians the response is to try to “spiritualize” our pain and never really deal with it. Face the pain. Be honest. Journal about it. Ask for prayer.
3. **Embrace the pain.** I think this is what Paul is explaining when it comes to the thorns in life.

Embracing the thorn in our life does not mean we are jumping in excitement when we face trials, but trusting God enough to endure it through His strength. When a person accepts their pain then it allows the Holy Spirit to pour through their life.

Are you embracing the pain (thorns) of life and using the refining process to bring God glory?<sup>11</sup>

\*David & Shimei 2 Samuel 16:11b-13 “Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. <sup>12</sup> It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today.” <sup>13</sup> So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went and threw stones at him and flung dust.”

Point = We as Americans Christ-followers know little of God working through unjust systems.

\*Do we care more about our version of politics and economic theories than we do about those without Christ coming to faith in Him?

\*Pastor behind the Iron Curtain, placed in a Soviet prison for 2 weeks. “I’m glad God allowed me to go to prison for 2 weeks because had I not been sent to prison I would not have been able to share the Gospel with those in the prison.”

Point =

\*Christianity’s explosive growth has almost always happened when under persecution by corrupt, tyrannical governments.

Jerry Rankin writes:

The tomb of Tamerlane, an impressive blue mosque like structure, is located in Samarkand, an historic city in Southern Uzbekistan. One of our early missionaries, who arrived in the city for language study during the period of political disruption and change in the early 1990s, was familiar with the history of the region and the impact of this ruler in decimating a Christian presence almost six hundred years earlier. While touring the city, he walked up to the tomb and announced in a lilting tone, “We’re back!” And a Christian witness is back, indeed! God has used hundreds of years of spiritual darkness to create a hunger in the hearts of people for what only Jesus can provide.”<sup>12</sup>

Q# As a Christian, am I *always* obligated to obey the government?

= No. Human law is only valid so long as it is in agreement with Natural Law/God’s Law.

\*Babylonian Tyrant/King Nebuchadnezzar commanding Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to worship a statue.

- God can work through the **lowly** – 2:4-21

Q# How does God work through the lowly? = He speaks to them.

---

<sup>11</sup> <http://joshrobinson.cc/2011/07/07/the-need-for-thorns/>

<sup>12</sup> Jerry Rankin and Ed Stetzer, *Spiritual Warfare and Missions: The Battle for God’s Glory Among the Nations* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 80.

3) Joseph obeys – 2:4-5

*“And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,<sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”*

- a. Travels from Nazareth in Bethlehem to Bethlehem in Judea – 2:4
- b. Joseph has to do this because he is in the line of David – 2:4
- c. Travels with Mary, his betrothed wife, pregnant with child – 2:5

4) Mary gives birth – 2:6-7

*“<sup>6</sup>And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”*

- a. It's time! – 2:6

\*Time – sovereignty

- b. Birth of Jesus – 2:7

- 1. Wrapped in strips of cloth – 2:7

- 2. Manger for a bed – 2:7

- 3. Born in a stable because there was no room in the inn – 2:7

\*Heresies of Jesus

5) Angels to Shepherds – Unlikely heralds – 2:8-14

*“<sup>8</sup>And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. <sup>10</sup>And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,*

*<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*

- a. Shepherds night duty over their sheep – 2:8

\*Probably spring time

- b. Angel of the Lord appeared to them – 2:9
- c. The glory of the Lord shone around them – 2:9
- d. The shepherds were filled with fear – 2:9

\* Lit. ‘they feared with a great fear’

6) Angel gives the message – 2:10

- a. Fear not
- b. I bring good news

- c. What kind of good news? = *of great joy*
- d. Who is the good news of great joy for? = *for all the people*
- e. What is the good news of great joy? 2:11 =
  - 1. Savior is born today
  - 2. Born in the city of David
  - 3. He is Christ the Lord

Paulus Fabius Maximus, proconsul of Asia, proposed beginning the new year on Augustus' birthday:

(It is hard to tell) whether the birthday of the most divine Caesar is a matter of greater pleasure or benefit. We could justly hold it to be equivalent to the beginning of all things...; and he has given a different aspect to the whole world, which blindly would have embraced its own destruction if Caesar had not been born for the common benefit of all.<sup>13</sup>

\*Later in the narrative Herod would be terrified and threatened at the birth of the real king.

Point = People are still freaked out about Jesus. Should you be? Yes. You cannot let Jesus have a part of you. He must have all of you and if you open the door to Him, He will not come in politely, sip a latte, and ask you what you want Him to do. When He enters your life He changes your life. Everything changes.

- f. Here's the sign of how to identify the Messiah – 2:12
  - 1. *Baby wrapped in cloths*
  - 2. *Baby lying in a manger*

\*The King of the Universe in strips of bundled up cloth and sleeping in...a manger?

2:7 “wrapped him                    in bands of cloth,        and laid him    in a manger”

23:53 “wrapped [Jesus’ body] in a linen cloth,                and laid it        in a...tomb”<sup>14</sup>

\*He will clothe you with His righteousness after He has stripped away your filthy garments of self-righteousness.

“the enthroned versus the lowly (1:52) – is represented here: Augustus the Emperor and Quirinius on one hand (2:1-2), the shepherds on the other.”<sup>15</sup>

\*Spreading of God’s glory from the Temple to a farm.

- g. Angel’s Praise – 2:13-14
  - 1. Immediate heavenly host surrounds the angel, praising God – 2:13
  - 2. “*Glory to God in the highest*” – 2:14
  - 3. “*peace, good will among men/and on earth peace among those with whom he is well pleased!*” – 2:14

<sup>13</sup> ET in Price, *Rituals and Power*, 52. Cited in, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> Derrett, “Manger at Bethlehem,” 43-44. Cited in, Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 131.

\*Proclamation of peace to all men totally undercuts the Roman claim of *Pax Romana* “Roman Peace.”

Point = You can't have real peace if you are at war with God and His Word!

We will only know peace when we stop fighting with God, lay down our arms of pride and accepting His terms.

\**UN & Pax Romana*

“Swords into Plowshares” sculpture in UN plaza with Isaiah 2:4, “*He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*”

Point = You can't have peace when you exclude the Prince of Peace, Jesus, and His Word, from your organization. You will forever be like a blind man trying to direct traffic in NYC.

\*We are not just for Judeo-Christian morality...we are for Christ. In fact, you can have pristine Judeo-Christian morality, be a card-carrying social conservative, and still go straight to hell.

“In the birth of this child, God's mercy has fallen on the world.”<sup>16</sup>

7) Shepherd's Reaction – 2:15-20

a. Let us go over to Bethlehem and check out what God has made known to us – 2:15

<sup>15</sup> *When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”*

b. “With haste” they seek and find exactly what was described to them – 2:16

<sup>16</sup> *And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*

c. They informed Mary and Joseph of the angelic message – 2:17

<sup>17</sup> *And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.*

\*awkward explanation – “Hey guys! Can I help you?” “Uh, um, there was this angel who appeared to us when we were pulling night duty with our sheep and told us that we would find the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God...here.”

Point = imagine how crazy and awkward it would have been for these shepherds to explain how they got to where they were but can you imagine how non-crazy their story would sound to Mary & Joseph. No other “God told me” story could ever top theirs.

= When God speaks into your life, it may sound crazy to those who have had no vision from God.

d. Everyone else wondered at the shepherd's story – 2:18

<sup>18</sup> *And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*

---

<sup>16</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 137.

e. Mary treasured up these things in her heart and pondered them – 2:19  
<sup>19</sup> *But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*

f. Shepherds returned home 2:20  
<sup>20</sup> *And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

\*Shepherds are the first Evangelists in Luke-Acts (and Anna the prophetess 2:38).<sup>17</sup>

1. Glorifying God

2. Praising God

3. Why? = Because of all they had heard and seen as it had been told them

\*God never lies

8) Jesus circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day – 2:21 = was called “Jesus” just as the angel had instructed before Jesus was supernaturally conceived in Mary’s womb.

- God can work by means that may be difficult to explain – 2:8-14

Closing AGI: Blind man, ‘All I know is that I once was blind but now I see!’

- God can work by means/methods that may be difficult to explain – 2:8-14

---

<sup>17</sup> Joel B. Green, *Acts*, 138.